Calgary Region Citizens Empowered by Access to Regional Open Data

BY CRPADMIN • DECEMBER 1, 2014 • ECONOMY, GIS, PARTNERSHIP/PLAN

By Paula Arab, Content Contributor

Residents in the Calgary Region will have more access to municipal data due to the launch of the Calgary Regional Partnership's Open Data website (www.calgaryregionopendata.ca).

Greater access to this data has many benefits and applications, including but not limited to:

- greater government transparency
- new applications, products or services
- improved efficiency of government services
- increased public participation

The new site was launched earlier this month on international Geographic Information Systems (GIS) day, a global event that, according to the website showcases "real-world applications that are making a difference in our society."

The launch, at the TELUS Spark Science Centre, was "a way for us to celebrate the work we do and show people how it affects them in their daily lives," said Jessica Letizia, GIS Coordinator for the Calgary Regional Partnership (CRP).

GIS Day at Telus Spark presented by the Calgary Regional Partnership, Southern Alberta Institute of Technology and the Alberta Geomatics Group.

So far, seven member municipalities are participating in the partnership's Open Data portal with more than 60 datasets already posted, and more being added every week.

The participating municipalities include Canmore, Airdrie, Banff, Chestermere, Cochrane, Okotoks and Strathmore. Some of the bigger municipalities, such as Calgary, already have their own Open Data portals.

What is Geographic Information Systems (GIS)?

A GIS can be used for capturing, storing and displaying data related to spatial positions on the Earth's surface.

For instance, a GIS can show multiple layers of data on one map, such as streets, bike paths, buildings, schools, traffic lights, and so on.

It enables people to more easily interpret and analyze patterns and relationships, creating applications with real-world relevance such as allowing users to report bear sightings in Canmore, for instance, or finding the nearest taxi stand.

"We've had a lot of requests for trails in Canmore," says Patricia Langevin, who was at TELUS Spark to help CRP launch Open Data. "Technology savvy users want to build apps around cycling and mountain biking and they want to do really cool things with our trail network because we're a world class mountain biking place."

Langevin, who is GIS coordinator for Canmore, says her municipality didn't have the required resources to start its own Open Data portal. "That's why this initiative of CRP really benefits us."

Langevin says requests for municipal data sets come from all channels, including utility companies, planners, and non-profit organizations such as universities looking to do research projects.

Open Data in the Calgary Region

Over in Airdrie, Corey Halford has been working on the Open Data initiative for five years.

Halford, the Data Services team lead for Airdrie, estimates it would have cost his municipality upward of $60,000 in one-time costs to create its own database, and another $20,000 to $30,000 a year to maintain it.

As it is, Airdrie's cost is just $2,000 a year to participate in CRP's portal.

"The value of the regional partnership is very tangible to Airdrie in this case," says Halford.

So far, Airdrie has uploaded 18 datasets, including neighbourhood names, civic addresses, schools and churches. Information relied upon by GPS routing companies has also been uploaded, including road centre lines and address points.

The CRP's portal doesn't just provide value to member municipalities, it provides value to the public, by empowering them with data that has already been paid for by taxpayers and collected.

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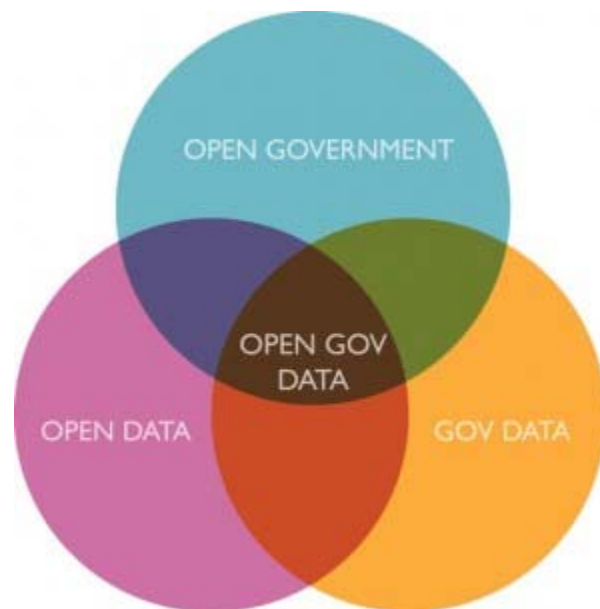
"We see value in enabling our community to be more resourceful with the information we have at our disposal," says Halford. "There's a lot of data the city consumes but doesn't make available to the public.

Open Data is an engine in which we can give the public access to this data and until you make it available, you don't know what we be relevant or what the demand will be for the information. Now we can measure it."

According to Halford, road blocks to Open Data include demonstrating the value of releasing the data, and overcoming the fear of how the information will be used, if released.

"We're not giving out data that's confidential or personal," says Halford. "Once people understand that, they begin to see the value in Open Data. There's a big push for open and transparent government, and Open Data is one of the fundamentals of open government."

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